

## Fostering and Orphan Lambs

### Orphan lambs

Orphan lambs occur in all flocks. They can result:

- When a ewe has a multiple birth but doesn't mother all lambs
- When ewes die during or after lambing or
- Because of poor mothering by ewes.

Poor mothering can be an important problem with maiden ewes, ewes that are undernourished in late pregnancy or in those that experience a slow or difficult delivery.

### Fostering

With indoor lambing systems it is often possible to foster orphan lambs onto ewes that have lost lambs or only got one lamb. There are a number of techniques used for fostering lambs. Some fostering techniques (e.g. crates) involve severe restriction of ewes, and these should be used as a last resort as they are less effective and can result in poor welfare for the ewe and lambs. More effective and non-invasive methods can ensure the bond between the ewe and her foster lamb is strong without compromising welfare. A strong bond which is vital when the ewe and lambs go out to pasture.

Where possible, wet fostering can be the simplest and least time consuming fostering method. This is where lambs are moved between ewes at the point of birth, when they are still wet. Older, dry lambs can also be wet fostered by covering them with foetal fluids from the foster ewe.

Wet fostering can be effective but is not fool proof, especially when dry lambs are used. If the ewe has lost her own lamb(s), skinning the dead lamb to create a 'jumper' for the foster lamb is a very effective technique, providing the tail is left on and the skin covers the anus of the foster lamb, and is reasonably well fitting.

If ewes continue to butt their lambs, they may be haltered for limited periods to prevent them from inflicting severe damage, ensuring the length of the halter allows the ewe to feed, drink and lie down normally.



## Orphan lamb systems

Fostering is not always successful, or there are not suitable ewes or conditions for fostering to take place. This is particularly the case in outdoor lambing systems, where the labour input required for fostering is much greater than for indoor systems. In these cases, the lambs can be reared as orphans. Developing a robust, efficient orphan lamb system can maximise productivity and welfare of these animals.

All lambs entering the orphan lamb system should have received adequate colostrum and undergone basic health checks (see 'Care of the Newborn Lamb'). Lambs should be suckled or fed powdered colostrum for the first 18 hours of life, after which time they can be started on milk or milk replacer.

There are a number of options for feeding milk or milk replacer, depending on the age and number of lambs being fed. Initially, lambs should be trained using a bottle to ensure they can suck properly. Once the lamb is able to drink from the bottle (this may take one or more feeds), it can be trained on a multi-suckle bucket or similar. For large groups of lambs, it may be more efficient to upscale from these multi-suckle buckets to automated feeders that can provide a continuous supply of milk to the group, saving time on manually mixing and feeding milk.

## Quantity and frequency of feeding

Lambs vary in size and vigour and drink different amounts of milk. Under natural conditions a lamb will suckle the ewe up to 40 times each 24 hours. Therefore small, frequent feedings are more beneficial than a few large feeds. You can use the feeding program in the table below as a guide. For lambs that are small and weak, it is better to feed a smaller quantity more often (say every four hours). One advantage of automated systems is that lambs can mimic their natural feeding frequencies due to the ad lib supply of milk.

Age (days)	Body weight (kg)	Volume of milk per feed (ml)	Total volume milk per day (ml)
0-4	2.5	75-100	300
	3.5	110-150	450-600
	5.0	150-200	500-700
4-5	-	160-250	750
6-14	-	250-660	750-1000
15 +	-	500-660	1500-2000



## Orphan lamb health

Ensure lambs always have access to fresh, clean water, clean bedding, short green pasture or hay and a high protein (20%) dry food from 2 weeks. Feed and bedding must be fresh and renewed each day. Although only small quantities will be eaten at first, such supplements will assist in rumen development, making an earlier weaning (five to six weeks) from the milk diet possible.

It is extremely important to keep all feeding equipment and mixing utensils clean and hygienic. After each feeding if using bottles or at least every 12 hours if using buckets, dismantle all equipment, rinse in cold water, scrub in hot water with a washing up liquid and then rinse in hot water and leave to dry. Heavily soiled equipment can be soaked in hot water and a mild disinfectant used. The use of equipment that has not been cleaned thoroughly can introduce infection and cause scouring.

It is important with orphan lamb systems to find the system that works for your farm. This will depend on the lambing system you run and the number of ewes, but some planning and minor investment can transform an orphan lamb system from a time consuming and costly activity into a viable farming enterprise.

